Network or Religious Communities Appreciation Dinner May 8, 2003

Featured Speaker

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Honored leaders of the Network, especially those gathered here at the dais, my good friend and colleague, Pastor John Buerk, and honored recipients of the wonderful service awards, I think it's just a delight to be here. I appreciate the excuse to be home. For those of you who aren't aware, I am now maintaining a home in Syracuse and my husband lives here in Buffalo, with the new job, the new calling, and so it's an interesting endeavor.

Who taught you about giving or about generosity?

I've been doing stewardship consultations with many groups over the last fifteen years or so for the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, mostly within the Lutheran Church family. Some of the congregations represented here have seen me or heard me. Often I meet with a committee or a council or some kind of group and I often ask that question to begin the conversation and to get to know the people that I'm working with. Who taught you about giving or about generosity?

Grandparents (how many grandparents are in the room?) are the most commonly named people in my work over the last ten years. Second, parents and sometimes people have mentioned their own children which I think is just wonderful. But people named are not limited to family members by any means. People have named people they work with. They've named teachers. They've named pastors, neighbors, members of their churches and even total strangers.

I have rarely gotten the name of anyone that I would consider famous. They may be well known within a particular congregation or a group but they're usually what we would call ordinary people. They care for families, they go to work, they're involved in their communities and they don't get a whole lot of hoopla about all of that. They're not glamorous and so they hardly ever make the news media or the tabloids. Generous people seem to show their generosity in the day-to-day walking in life. And it is rare that the stories that I am told about generous people have anything to do with money. Occasionally, someone will talk about that, but most often, stories are about someone who has shared whatever it was they have; time, money, sometimes a listening ear, expertise, advice, time, time. I've discovered that generous and giving people, though, almost always have three things in common. The first is that they are people who know that they have been blessed by God. They're not only able to recognize God's mercy and goodness in their own lives, but they're able to talk about it and they frequently do, usually putting the spotlight some place else than on themselves.

That sense of being blessed by God is something that the churches of this Network of Religious Communities (the churches and the synagogues and the mosques and all of the different groups that are gathered here) all share. It's one of the great gifts that I think was given when we did the interfaith Thanksgiving services. (Are you still doing those?) On the Tuesday evening usually prior to Thanksgiving, there is an interfaith Thanksgiving service. I don't know if any of you have ever attended it. For me, it has always been the most moving service that I have gone to on Thanksgiving because what you hear are these words about the wonder of the creator in a whole bunch of different languages, and some of them in song, coming from a variety of traditions but all giving honor and understanding themselves to be blessed in some way by the one who created them and sustains them every day.

I do want to take just a moment, an aside here, a little plug. I have now been serving in our Conference of Bishops for eight months. The Lutheran Bishops all get together. There are 66 of them in different settings and in January, our topic was "A Multifaith and a Multicultural World" and there were Bishops there, I'm say sad to say, who have never been part of interfaith organizations. And I was a brand new, what they call, baby Bishop and I started talking about the 30-plus years of history that we have here as the Network of Religious Communities. And it was just an incredible thing because we have this treasure here in Buffalo that doesn't even exist in some places and whole bunches of our own people don't realize what a great gift it is until some kind of crisis emerges. There have been a whole bunch of organizations formed since 9/11 across the country, but I would guess that we're one of the oldest in the United States and so it's something very much to be treasured and to be proud of here in Buffalo.

So the first thing about generous people is they're people who know they've been blessed by their God. The people who knew that they were blessed also tended to appreciate everything they received and didn't focus on what they didn't have. They noticed all the little things that we all so often take for granted, like breathing. How many breaths have you taken today that you've given thanks for? You couldn't have survived without them, my friend. When do we notice it? When something happens with our lungs and we're on a respirator. Then we start counting them. But it's such a normal thing, such a tremendous gift. We don't really appreciate it much. I could say the same about heartbeats. It's incredible how these people measure life in a way differently than what you will see advertised on TV. Generous people do not worry about what they can accumulate in terms of stuff, because they're not spending their time thinking about themselves. They're thinking about their community and how their lives express their faith.

And finally, the third thing that naturally follows from that is that they let the blessing and the mercy of God that they have known and been blessed by and their appreciation for all that they have already received shine through them in care for and attention to others besides themselves and often beyond their own family circle.

So, who taught you about giving and generosity? I have heard incredible stories before and I expect if you read through this booklet, you're going to see a whole bunch more of them. I invite you to pay attention to them. I see new ones every day and there are even some wonderful ones surfacing on the Internet that kind of help us to focus. But I want to tell you one personal story. It's about Agnes and Helen and I apologize to the few of you here who might have heard it. Agnes was one of those people who most people do their best to avoid. She worshiped for years in her local congregation. She always sat in the very last pew and she always sat alone. As a matter of fact, people used to leave a pretty wide berth around her, partly because she was a pretty large person, and partly because she smelled. She was not very clean. She was rather unkempt. She, obviously, did not take very good care of herself and when she stopped coming to church one winter, hardly anybody noticed. Except for Helen. Helen was another member of that same congregation. She always sat near the front of the sanctuary. Now I don't know about faiths and traditions other than Lutheran. Lutherans always have their pews staked out—Helen's was fifth row from the right on the pulpit side. She and her family were very active in the life of the congregation. They were the kind of people who did everything, and Helen believed that God had put her on this earth in order to help people and care about them. And Helen noticed when Agnes stopped coming to church and she decided to do something about it.

She tried to call her. That's when she discovered that Agnes had no phone. She was not to be deterred. She got her address and she went to visit. It was the first time that anyone other than the pastor had even been in Agnes' home. Helen found out that Agnes hadn't been coming to church because it was too far to walk and Agnes' legs were bothering her and she had no money for a taxi. So Helen said, "I'll come pick you up next week and I'll take you." And then Helen began to look around her at what was a rather dingy second floor apartment and she was shocked; there's no other word for it; she was shocked.

She discovered why Agnes smelled; it's because they had no hot water in this apartment at all and it was pretty cold and so they weren't bathing the way they should. Agnes and her brother lived there. Agnes also had an infection and she had no money to pay for medical care and had no money to pay for the medications even if she'd gone to see the doctor. They were living on her brother's disability and no one had ever told them that they could

receive further assistance. But even if they had known that, they were way too proud for that. Helen decided that God had sent her to this place and if she didn't do something about it, probably nobody would. Helen's husband was not happy. He thought she was taking on too much responsibility. Others just thought Helen was crazy. And maybe she was, but it didn't stop her. She made doctors appointments with her own doctor. She transported Agnes and her brother to her own doctor and she helped them fill out all the forms that were required and what Medicaid didn't cover, Helen paid herself. She called the landlord, asked about the hot water, discovered that they were way behind on their rent. He had not been willing to toss them out on the street for which she was very, very thankful. But he also then didn't have any money to pay for the improvements and repairs. So she negotiated with him. She said, "I have some friends; if we renovated and I contracted out for this and we took care of this, would that be okay, and will you promise not to toss them on the street once the apartment is fixed?" He agreed and that's when Helen decided she couldn't do it alone anymore and she got her friends from church together and she explained the whole story to them and she said, "We have to do something." They all thought she was nuts, and in a month or two, the entire apartment was renovated; plumbing, wiring, and decorating; and they all chipped in to buy Agnes and her brother a phone. Agnes and Helen are both gone. Helen died first and there were lots of big, expensive flower arrangements at her funeral because she was well loved and was a well-known person. But by far and away, the most beautiful arrangement was a little tiny hand-picked bouquet that was placed in her hands. It was the only thing that would be allowed in the casket because they were chosen and placed there by Agnes. If you ever wonder whether one person can make a difference, think about Agnes.

It is not what we say that teaches generosity. It is how we live and I know that for a fact because Helen was my teacher. Helen was my mother. Who taught you about giving and about generosity? Read these stories. Keep your eyes and your ears and your hearts open as you wander around this world, because you are going to see them if you're ready to. In a few minutes, you're going to have a whole parade of Helens; people who have given of themselves and whose lives are a witness to us and the models for us of who we can be in our communities of faith and our neighborhoods. Each and every one of you who is honored here tonight is an example of what it means to give and to be generous. You are an honor to your faith tradition and to your God.

I do have one final tale. This one is also personal. There is another person who has been one of my most important teachers about generosity and giving. He's here. He didn't get an award tonight. He's not eligible. He's a pastor and he will be embarrassed when I mention his name. Some of you know it's going to be Jim Jerge, my husband. One of his most recent acts of generosity has been his strong support of my new call as Bishop. As I mentioned, it means that I'm away from home a lot and he has taken on some new household responsibilities and chores that used to be mine. Cooking is not his favorite, but what are you going to do? And, by the way, this is our big date for the week, so we appreciate your buying our dinner. Anyway—we were on vacation at Easter and we like to read (post Easter, you know, you just kind of let down after all of the celebration and hoopla) and one book that we both read is entitled "Watchers" by Dean Koontz. The books by this author are thrillers. If you don't like blood, do not read them. Sometimes they are creepy and sometimes they are weird. But we both really enjoy reading them because there's always a kernel of theology somewhere buried in the book. And in this particular book, it is on page 419. He told me this when he was reading the book and I totally forgot about it and I got to page 419 and I said, "Here it is, page 419." And I'd like to share it with you. It's a very short prose and I will close with that.

"We have a responsibility to stand watch over one another. We are watchers, all of us, watchers guarding against the darkness. You taught me that we're all needed, even those who sometimes think we're worthless or plain and dull.

If we love and allow ourselves to be loved, well, a person who loves is the most precious thing in the world, worth all the fortunes that ever were.

That's what you've taught me, she said, and because of you, I'll never be the same."

Thank you for being my teachers this night. Because of you I will never be the same.